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Loose Canon on the Deck: Curriculum Wars of the Nineties

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In 1839, Horace Mann opened the first Normal School in Massachusetts. We now speak of "Teacher Training Programs," not "Normal Schools." But the concept of the "Normal School" has not been lost in the history of education. The Normal School was an attempt to set standards—to control the wilderness. It is thus part of the long tradition of attempts to form an American "canon"—a tradition which everyone recognizes began as a resistance to an Anglo-European tradition. The Normal School thus takes its place as part of the great dream of universal American public education. It reminds us that behind the dream lay a desire for "normalcy," a need to *center* the multifarious American world. Establishing an American "canon"—that roll call of inspired and inspiring saints to make up the memory core of a culture—would be an obvious *sine qua non* of such a consolidating effort. Those who had been recently "canonized," like Emerson and Fenimore Cooper, stood at the head of a list to which later writers and thinkers would be added, like rings on the great trunk of the American cultural tree. They preserved and extended the wished-for tradition, the center America sought because it felt its lack.

What, after all, was the "core" of this new culture? A nostalgia for a rejected or lost European culture? A pioneer spirit with little use for "book-learning"? From the beginning, America has felt itself to be, in Emerson's words, "formless, [having] no terrible & no beautiful condensation" (*Emerson in His Journals* 370). In short, America was "undisciplined." It was both proud of and disturbed by this fact, just as it wished to be both connected to and separate from the traditions of its many constituencies. The one consistent characteristic of the school tradition in America has indeed been a battle for "discipline," from the rural teacher's need to show his mettle—even if it meant beating up the class bully—to the establishment (with Mann) of the school-day organized by subjects (or disciplines). The Normal School was an attempt to martial education on the grand scale. In this attempt, America looked anxiously to the educational systems of other countries—from the Prussian monitorial schools to Italy's Montessori Method to (much later) Japanese education. At the same time, Americans felt an instinctive resentment toward organized public education. Emerson also expressed this aspect of the American character when he reflected, "Our modes of Education aim to expedite, to save labor; to do for masses

what cannot be done for masses, what must be done reverently, one by one" (*The Portable Emerson* 59). In fact, from the beginning, the American tradition was ambiguously a heritage of order *and* disruption.

This was not a conscious realization in the American public, however. Even today, that public continues to "talk school" in a pugnacious language evoking the patriotic fervors of our self-dramatizing wars, from the charge up Juan Hill to Colombian Drug Interdiction. Schools have had to take their place as weaponry in "Wars" on Poverty, Illiteracy, and Drugs. They have also been, since well before Sputnik, a key component of America's arsenal in its battle for dominance among the nations. Alas, so much warring loosens the artillery on the decks of the S.S. Academia.

There has been an inevitable and increasing desire on the part of the professorate to get hold of the "loose canon." But this is a canon that will not easily be secured—unless we conceive it as somehow inherently "loosened," flexible, and open to cultural ex/change. In fact, there has never been a single canon, and so, as Wendell Harris has rightly said, "to attack The Canon is to misconceive the problem" (Harris 118). Similarly, Ross Chambers has warned that "We are blind. . . when we seek to oppose the canon by changing the titles of texts and the names of authors" (Chambers 20). The problem will not thus be solved because such debates and struggles constitute precisely the "canonicity" with which we struggle. We must, rather, seek to create a theory and practice for a new kind of canonicity—one that *assumes* a "multi-vocal" canon. This project disturbs many because it would appear to encourage the merging of American culture into global culture. Such a transformation, I would argue, is really the logical outcome of the sometimes incoherent political phenomenon we have called "America." The many "counter-canon" competing for the high ground of discussion in American literary studies—third world, Asian, Hispanic, Jewish, feminist, gay, and so forth—reflect an original/continuing predicament of American culture, one that now appears potentially its greatest advantage within a changing world order.

Yet we must recognize that America remains the most parochial of world powers. The two major educational battles that will continue vigorously into the '90s—one over pedagogy, the other over content—are related and inevitably form one large war in the popular mind, a war to beat the Japanese, Germans, and anyone else who would challenge American market dominance. Nothing has frustrated the American taxpayer more in the past decades than the slip in American world economic power; and all schools, from preschools to graduate

schools, are objects of that frustration. Americans have expected schools to hold this culture together. But plainly, American culture has become more and more radically multiple, less and less clearly centered in a single tradition, despite massive expenditures to "anchor" this society in its schools. The newspaper brings almost daily letters and editorials on how our schools have failed and what to do about it. Generally, these letters express frustration that we have fallen behind the Japanese and other industrial nations in our test scores. There is also a widely-held view that American education went wrong about the time that John Dewey appeared on the scene, and that we have never recovered from the ill-effects of his emphasis on student-oriented curricula and the teaching of learning-how-to-learn.

Archaic it may sound to those of us who have since the '60s been confronting "the oppressor's language," as Adrienne Rich has called it—but the cry of "back to the basics" still stirs American hearts. It is a cry that will be heard more and more at universities, along with criticism that research-obsessed college instructors serve their students poorly. Book banning has been on the increase, and the influence of special-interest groups on curricula will increase. Heeding not the lessons of the past, state legislatures will respond to pressure to hold all schools, including universities, somehow accountable. We live in an unabated battle for control over "outcomes," a battle that has resulted in heavily determined curricula at the elementary and secondary schools across the country, though there are now some hopeful signs of reform. Nonetheless, calls for control at the university level are likely to increase, and professors can expect to see challenges to their reading lists, especially when those lists stray outside whatever one group or another deems to be the true, the one, the only "canon."

Whatever we do with the canon, we should try to avoid turning it around on ourselves. By this I mean that we must understand that in the wider culture our doubts and revisions are generally taken to mean that, like Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*, professors decide whimsically what the canon means at that particular moment—and change their minds the next. If college professors no longer believe in a roll call of great works, why should anyone else? There are some who would welcome this final splintering crash of the tree. But the changes we have seen are not incoherent and should not be presented that way. We still have something very important to say—to each other and to our society. It is something about the difficult task of being "open." The most important role educational institutions can play is in helping Americans recognize that the battle has always been over our identity

as a culture and our acceptance of differences within it. We should remember what we started fighting for.

I recall as a beginning college teacher at a major university expressing to a colleague my desire to add texts by black and women authors to my American Novel course. I was uncertain about which books to pick, and I knew I needed to do much reading to remedy my ignorance. My colleague said, "But why are you worried about that? Just teach the classics. We shouldn't be squeezing in inferior books just because we want to include minorities." How does one overcome this Catch-22 of the canon—that if those "other books," like Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, for example, were part of the roll call, that book would have been written by another person? How is it that change can occur? How can the door ever be opened to other traditions when openness is equated with lowering standards? We cannot begin to solve this problem without seeing that it is a central part of our wider cultural dilemma of accepting "otherness," something that is not rarefied, esoteric, or ivory tower, but rather a problem of daily life.

In short, there is a connection between the battle of the canon in universities and the struggle of America to live up to its own credo, as Martin Luther King challenged us to do. Plainly, it is both a theoretical and a practical challenge, for it requires the creation of a philosophy of multiplicity and difference, and the promotion of public policies to foster it. Now, we have such a tradition already in the work of the pragmatists, like James and Dewey, and in the philosophy of Bergson and other believers in the open society. To reinterpret that tradition and trace it to the work of our contemporaries, like Kristeva, Lacan, Foucault, and Deleuze—that is the job college and university faculty were meant to play. If we can bring ourselves truly to embrace this goal, not just pay it lip service, a number of clouds will drift off away over our horizon and disappear. For no other institution is this more true than education. That will still leave plenty of bad weather, though, especially for elementary and secondary education, where the battle brews. And here faculty must bring theory to practice.

We must show that the respect for individual needs and creativity is not just something we *wish* for—but something of immediate practical value: a way out of the dead-end of achievement testing and rote-task instruction. We must remind the public that we want students who converse and discuss freely, openly, flexibly, ingeniously. We want them to have a lively interest in language—how it works, what can be done with it, where its pitfalls lie. We want people who are able to use language and quantitative reasoning to define and combat the complex

political, educational, social, and emotional problems we all confront today. We want them to grow up having some ability to appreciate the difficulty and the beauty of what a novelist, poet, playwright—or even a critic—does with language. These are our wishes, our dreams.

But for reasons which have primarily to do with business and administration, we have been doing the opposite in elementary and secondary education. We have often deprived students of choice in their studies; taken away time to discuss or debate; asserted the authority of school boards and textbooks; and we have turned much of learning into “tasks.”

Some of us in the college community have complained that high schools and elementary schools are failing to impart the “basics.” While we may feel strongly that this is so, we should reflect that this criticism exacerbates the schools’ tendency to control curricula by reducing them to rote lists contained in textbooks. We cannot really open the canon unless we confront the unholy alliance between schools and textbook publishers.

There is a scene in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* in which Milo Minderbinder explains that he can’t fight the war because he has signed a contract to deliver goods to the enemy. “Maybe they did start the war, and maybe they are killing millions of people,” he admits, “but they pay their bills. . .” (Heller 251). For Milo, the “syndicate” comes before the war. We would do well to realize that all our efforts to combat illiteracy, to educate, to enlighten and liberate are taking place in a context in which a powerful syndicate has control. It is the textbook syndicate—the one, for example that rules the state of Texas with an iron hand, and has enabled lobbyists like Mel and Norma Gabler to get a virtual stranglehold on what goes into the books teachers hand children. This syndicate is behind the watered-down, colorfree, odorfree, content-free teaching materials that are routinely handed to starting teachers across the nation. Instruction that is truly whole-language and literature based must proceed from outside the syndicate. This means that more teachers must create curricula of their own. That means, clearly, a loss of power for textbook authors and publishers, as their work will no longer be mandated on large scales for large sales. It means loosening and individualizing.

More people than ever before can “decode.” Fewer are “literate.” This would be the equivalent of saying that 80% of students can recognize a bike, name its parts, and answer a multiple choice test on the functions of the bicycle. But only 25% of those can ride one to the store. And only 30% of those make it home alive. Understandably, panic

continues. The more worried we become, the more we fall back on dictating curricula, trying to make the curriculum "idiot-proof." But the more rote tasks students do, the worse the situation gets. And what kind of a teacher wants to work in an idiot-proof system?

When it comes to curricula at all levels, we really have just two basic ways to go. One direction is control, standardization, hierarchy. It is E.D. Hirsch's list of must-read and need-to-know. Out of this curriculum comes the Rigid Canon. This is not to reject lists of important books, dates, or any other information. Gathering and transcribing such lists will continue to be a large part of the job scholars do. "The Canon" is precisely such a list, and we need it, if only to focus our struggles.

But any such lists are snapshots of the culture, taken from a particular social and political point of view, which become rapidly dated. And the concept of one list for America? Well, that might be conceivable, though not necessarily desirable, in a small, relatively insulated country. But it is the wrong goal for a huge, multi-cultural society growing ever more diverse. Hirsch has spoken eloquently about our need to "center" ourselves. He does not have in mind, however, a culture that is centered on acceptance of difference, a culture that is a multiplicity that makes a unity. But there are others among us who can speak to this. They are those who want a curriculum that reflects diversity, not one more attempt to turn back the clock—and as I have argued, that would just be a case of back to the future, anyway! It would be another attempt at normalizing a tradition that began with multiple centers in the first place. It would be another attempt to prop up the mythical trunk of the aging tree. To these others, of whom I speak, America has always been a different sort of garden—unkempt, but beautiful. What Emerson said regretfully, we say with joy: "America. . . the ungirt, the diffuse, the profuse, the procumbent, one wide ground juniper, out of which no cedar, no oak will rear up a mast to the clouds! it all runs to leaves, to suckers, to tendrils, to miscellany" (*Emerson in His Journals* 370). We need a new way of conceiving and representing our multiplicity. We need a new sense of our canon, our curriculum, and our teaching. We don't need strident "counter-canons," nor the reactionarism of those who, like Hirsch and Bloom, seem to be elaborating "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

Actually, that comparison is unfair to Wallace Stevens. You may recall that "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is divided into three sections, all of which apply to our topic: "It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," and "It Must Give Pleasure." In this last section, a character named the Canon Aspirin comes to bed and meditates on his own

"nothingness," feeling his very identity slide away. He struggles to re-conceive a world, to hold on to the main point, though he feels that it is a point

Beyond which thought could not progress as thought.
He had to choose. But it was not a choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things
That in each other are included, the whole,
The complicate, the amassing harmony.
(Stevens 403)

Stevens said something wonderful there. He advocated openness and flexibility and the willingness to re-conceive the world as a multiplicity that makes a unity, a strenuous complexity, and a world of evolution—what he liked to call "a project." That is something like the canon I envision. A project. A project undertaken along certain lines, however.

This is the other, better direction for us : openness, flexibility, and freedom. In this direction lies a "loose canon," one that changes not only with time, but with the backgrounds and traditions of the learners. This canon supports a curriculum that teaches one group of important facts or authors, without negating others. Such a curriculum has open doors. That makes it vulnerable to attacks by groups motivated by fear and narrow-mindedness. But when it is vigorously defended by those who know better, it is strong.

One such defender of the open curriculum was John Dewey. Today, Louise Rosenblatt has heroically brought back a Deweyan approach to the language arts, with its progressive and process-oriented model based on Dewey's idea of "freedom toward the re-determination and re-naming of the objects comprised in the system" (Dewey and Bentley 122). Gerald Graff has written that the field of literary studies faces a crisis because it has failed "to relate itself to a general body of ideas that might give it a relation to the social world" (Graff 561). If so, then Rosenblatt has restored Dewey to the discussion at the perfect moment. She has argued eloquently that to return to a Deweyan approach is by no means to accept a sort of "anarchic egalitarianism" (Rosenblatt 140).

Enid Douglass, an oral historian (and my mother), knows of my interest in Bergson and Dewey, and passed along this story: Dewey had a graduate student who wrote a dissertation on Bergson. The student recounts sitting in Dewey's office and discussing her dissertation, a good part of which criticized Dewey's theory of reality. Dewey never betrayed any irritation. But when the final copy was about to be filed,

he suddenly said, "If I were you, I'd leave out Chapter 3." That chapter was on the principle of life and God. The student said, "But Mr. Dewey, I'm very interested in that chapter."

"Are you?" said Dewey. "Then leave it in."

Dewey was not "big" on God as a subject, and likely did not make his suggestion lightly. But the point is clear. This student's work was her own. Her vision of the world was what counted. Whatever else we may say of him, Dewey's response was the right one. Teachers are there to foster others' growth, not to blast them with their canons, Secular/Humanist or other.

We do not need a return to an old canon that was always already absent anyway. Nor do we need to a substitute another "truer" one. We have always had one palace revolution after another, and that has been our "canonicity." It is up to us to disclose and to elucidate the "loose canon." That is, in my view, as much as to say that we must take our place in a changing, deeply troubled world culture. It will necessarily be a culture of multiplicity, one in which openness is not only "nice" but necessary. We who do literary theory had better try to express to the society around us the sort of order a multiplicity makes, for its sake and our own. As Stevens said:

A. A violent order is disorder; and

B. A great disorder is an order. These Two things are one.

(Pages of illustrations.)

(Stevens 215)

What is the true canon? There is, delightfully, no limit to the answers that might be given. It will consist of those works that speak to us about our identity *and* our differences. That, if we can be open to it, will become our "amassing harmony."

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